CIA Manual Soviets Got Detailed U.S. Spy Satellite

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A former officer of the Central Intelligence Agency who was arrested last week for passing secrets to the Soviets is alleged to have sold them a technical manual describing the "Big Bird" photographic satellite that spies on the Soviet Union from earth orbit.

Intelligence sources said yesterday that the top-secret document was gone for almost a year without being noticed. A CIA search for the manual began only after FBI agents asked whether it was missing.

The loss of the manual has led to a wholesale review of CIA security procedures, both by the CIA and the Senate Intelligence Committee, sources said.

The Big Bird is no more than 5 years old. More than a dozen of the 12-ton units have been put into earth orbit by the United States to take pictures of Soviet missile silos, submarine bases, naval installations, airfields and troop movements.

The photographs taken by Big Bird are so precise that they can distinguish between civilians and people in

See SPY, A16, Col. 1

SPY, From A1

military uniform and can pick out the makes of automobiles, even read their license plates.

When onetime CIA man William P. Kampiles was arrested in Chicago last week, federal government sources said Kampiles had done the United States "irreparable harm" in selling technicial material to the Soviet Union.

The government sources last week did not mention that Kampiles had allegedly dealt away the details of Big Bird, only that he had sold secrets of a classified system known as KH-11.

Intelligence sources said yesterday that KH-11 was the CIA code name for Keyhole-11, which is the Big Bird photographic reconnaissance satellite. These sources said it is difficult to measure how much the Soviet have profited from the manual describing Big Bird. They cannot build such a satellite of their own from the manual, but they may be able to identify weaknesses in the satellite and protect their secret installations accordingly, some experts suggested.

One source said it would do the United States very little harm, since the sale of the manual did not give the Soviets the ability to stop the satellites from taking pictures.

"The Russians know this satellite has been in orbit taking pictures of their country for some time," the source said. "Getting their hands on the manual doesn't stop the satellite and doesn't stop the pictures."

Senate Intelligence Committee members asked pointed questions of CIA officials during a closed-door briefing on the case last Friday, according to sources. Members wanted to know how Kampiles, 23, a low-level "watch officer" who left the CIA after eight months in 1977, allegedly could have walked off with a top-secret document without it being noticed for nearly a year.

The CIA already has started an internal review of its security procedures because of the Kampiles case, sources said yesterday.

The son of Greek immigrants, Kampiles was arrested a few days after he had allegedly told an FBI agent about selling the secret satellite manual to a Soviet diplomat in Athens earlier this year.

Intelligence sources said the FBI became suspicious of Kampiles when he wrote a letter to a CIA colleague saying he was in contact with and had received money from the Soviets. He allegedly volunteered to spread "disinformation" to them. The reference to money alerted federal officials, because it is a known Soviet intelligence technique never to pay anyone without receiving documents in return, sources said.

Kampiles was questioned by an agent from the FBI's Washington field office early last week, and explained finally how he had contacted the Soviets on a trip to Athens in February, according to sources.

At one meeting with the Soviets in Athens, Kampiles allegedly turned over the cover page and an illustration of the KH-11 satellite. A few days later he returned and gave the rest of the manual to a security officer named Michael, according to sources. In return, he accepted and signed a receipt for the cash.

A CIA security officer told the FBI last week that a copy of the satellite manual assigned to the center where Kampiles worked was missing. It is not known whether other classified documents also are missing, sources said yesterday.

Kampiles is a 1975 graduate of Indiana University. He worked at the CIA from March to November of last year — at a GS-7 scale, paid less than $15,000 a year.

In his capacity as "watch officer," he received and relayed top-secret messages. He also had access to the storage drawer where the manual was located. And one day, he told the FBI, according to sources, he put the document in the inner pocket of his sports coat and took it home.

Though intelligence community officials have voiced fears about proceeding with the case because of the sensitive satellite material involved, there seems little doubt that the Justice Department will move to indict Kampiles. "We fully intend to go forward," a spokesman said yesterday.

Sen. Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.), a member of the intelligence committee, said yesterday that the allegations against Kampiles raise serious questions about CIA security procedures. "They're forever telling us how weak the Congress is [in protecting secrets]. To my knowledge nothing close to this has come out of either house."

Sources close to the CIA said they were surprised that a watch officer had access to a document describing what is generally regarded as the most secret intelligence satellite built by the United States.

"Normally, these documents are kept in a safe and are never kept anywhere near a watch office," one source said. "The whole thing sounds a little like sloppy secrecy."

The Big Bird satellite is a multibillion-dollar program managed jointly by the Pentagon and the CIA. The satellites were launched from California's Vandenberg Air Force Base into a polar orbit that takes each of them over the same place on earth every two weeks.

The Big Bird satellites are equipped with cameras that take photographs in black-and-white, color and infrared. The cameras send their photos back by electronic means, then parachute capsules containing the exposed film down to earth. The pictures they take have been described by some who have seen them as "remarkable."

"The resolution of these cameras is superb," one source said. "There's almost no way you can camouflage things or hide things from these cameras."